

FLETCHER, RALPH HOW TO WRITE YOUR
LIFE STORY. NEW YORK: SCHOLASTIC, 2007.
PRINT.

Crafting Your Story

This chapter deals with how to harness your powers as a writer to make your story come alive. Many books have been written about the writer's craft. In this chapter I've selected four craft tips that will be especially helpful with autobiographical writing.

• **WRITE SMALL.** I'm talking details here. Your life story will probably include some big issues, for example, battling an older kid who bullied you on the bus, the anticipation of a new school or new baby sister, or the move to a new home. To make those ideas come alive, you'll need to reveal them through specific details.

Let's say you write, "The day I moved to Ohio,

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my best friend Greg gave me some weird stuff he collected." The curious reader will want to know what kind of stuff? That sentence comes alive if you tap into the power of the particular:

"The day I moved to Ohio, my best friend Greg gave me his prize collection of decapitated piñatas."

In *Marshfield Dreams* I described something that happened when I first started school. My younger brother Jimmy would find treasures in the woods and give them to me when I got off the bus.

That afternoon when I got off the bus, Jimmy was at the bus stop, tapping his feet, eagerly waiting for me.

"Look!" He had a small animal skull in his hands.

"What is it?"

"I think it's a beaver," he said. "Too big to be a cat. I found the bones in the woods. Here. It's for you."

The next day when I stepped off the bus, he gave me an old wasp's nest. Every day, as soon as I got off the bus, he'd hand me a treasure he'd found in the woods.

You can see that the big ideas—Jimmy cared for me, and missed me terribly when I went to school—are fleshed out by the small details in this example of how Jimmy gave me those peculiar presents.

Here's a secret that may surprise you. *Marshfield Dreams* is a "true" memoir, but when I wrote it I made up certain details when I couldn't actually remember them. Honestly, I don't remember exactly what Jimmy gave me those first two times I got off the bus. I invented the two details—small animal skull and old wasp's nest—because those are exactly the kinds of things Jimmy would have found in the woods.

Of course, you shouldn't alter the main parts of your life story, adding a stepbrother if you didn't have one, or making your father a professional baseball player if, in fact, he was a plumber. But you can make up small particulars that you can't remember. If you stay true to the spirit of the book, and invent details that fit with the characters, they will sound convincing to a reader and will help your story come alive.

- **INVIGORATE YOUR VERBS.** Consider this sen-

tence: *My hot, tired, sweaty feet dipped into the cool, sparkling, refreshing water.*

That's not an example of vivid writing. The sentence is terribly overwritten, in danger of collapsing from the weight of all those adjectives! Adding a ton of adjectives is like pouring too much syrup on a waffle. It won't make your writing strong.

I'll tell you a secret: It's not the adjectives or the adverbs that create vibrant writing. It's the verbs. Take a look at this paragraph:

On August 19, at five A.M., my dad got me out of bed to go deep-sea fishing. I didn't want to go (I don't like anything nautical) but he asked me non-stop until finally I said okay. After all, it was his fiftieth birthday. The wind was making a small chop, and a series of small waves hit the bow of our boat as we went toward Georges Bank, where the big fish are.

Notice what happens to the writing in this paragraph when I upgrade the verbs.

On August 19, at five A.M., my dad dragged me out of bed to go deep-sea fishing. I didn't want to go (I detest anything nautical) but he badgered me nonstop until finally I caved in. After all, it was his fiftieth birthday. The wind had kicked up a small chop, and a series of small waves spanked the bow of our boat as we steamed toward Georges Bank, where the big fish roam.

You don't want to overdo it by adding a series of exotic, unusual verbs that call attention to themselves and send your readers heading for the dictionary to look them up. But be conscious of your verbs. The nouns create the pictures, but the verbs make those pictures move. Your writing will improve instantly if you find intriguing and muscular verbs to drive those sentences.

- **CREATE YOUR CHARACTERS.** The characters in your story may include parents, siblings, camp counselors, close friends, pets, and maybe even an enemy or two. If you want your story to engage readers, those characters must be interesting to read about.

When it comes to the characters in an auto-

biography, there's a built-in danger. Since these characters are familiar to you, you might get lazy and assume that your readers will automatically know them too. Don't! You can't just put your characters into your story and expect them to come alive in the mind of your readers. Instead, you must actively create them as you would fictional characters. The challenge is to reveal those characters not just on the outside, through their hair color, size, car, and clothes, but also through their inner lives—their hopes, fears, and flaws. Here are three tools for making your characters believable:

DIALOGUE

Mr. Waverly picked on certain kids, like Tommy Kimball, who always sat in class with his mouth partly open.

"If you don't close your mouth," Mr. Waverly told Tommy, "a fly will land in there."

GESTURE

Bryan viciously ripped off a chunk of bread, spraying crumbs everywhere.

TELLING DETAIL

Uncle Paul's idea of a perfect vacation was to

sleep until noon and stay in his pajamas all day long.

Let's see how a professional does it. In his autobiography, *King of the Mild Frontier*, Chris Crutcher wrote this description of a dangerous man named Ray:

He was about six feet, five inches tall and weighed more than 300 pounds, almost always dressed in a cowboy outfit. It was not a Roy Rogers outfit, with which I may have been better equipped to identify from my youth, but a real cowboy outfit: boots and leather pants and a huge belt buckle with long cow horns above the caption YOU CAN HAVE MY COLT FORTY-FIVE WHEN YOU PRY IT FROM MY COLD DEAD FINGERS.

Notice that Chris Crutcher lists several details about Ray, but he saves the best one for last because he wants that one to have the biggest impact on the reader.

• **WAKE UP YOUR NARRATOR.** It's easy to forget that *you* are the most important character in your life history. You're the narrator, the one telling

your story. Try to write the way you would speak. That way, the writing will sound like you. This is called *voice*. A strong, believable voice is the most essential ingredient when writing a personal history.

As the narrator, you'll be in the dual role of telling and reflecting, both of which are important. At the same time, it's essential for readers to see you *doing*—reacting to events, expressing emotion, interacting with other characters. You can't sleepwalk through the piece; you've got to be involved. When a memoir works well, the narrator is an active character, someone we feel we know from the inside out.

Here's part of a memoir written by a fifth grader named Julia.

Do you know how a heart sounds? Well, if not, labump! labump! labump! That's what a healthy heart is supposed to sound like, and I should know because I had one, at least I thought I did, until my mom took me to the doctor's office for my three-year-old checkup. Then Dr. Wells put his stethoscope to my bare chest and heard something he

shouldn't have heard, something that would change the next two years of my life. . . .

The following piece was written by Cyrene Wells, a teacher and writer. In this "memoir patch," the author shares an event from her childhood. The piece has strong voice and a nice balance of external actions and inner feelings.

Squished

I hadn't played in our old sandbox for a long time, and grasslike weeds were growing in the hard sand. There wasn't much to do, and I was pretty bored.

A toad came around the edge of the sandbox near my feet. I watched as it stopped moving and sat still, facing away from me. It didn't move for the longest time, and after a while I reached across the sand for a stick to poke at it. When I poked him in the back he moved forward but not very much. I poked again, and he moved forward a body's length. I poked again and again, nudging him, and it seemed to irritate him. He was hopping this way

and that way like he really wanted to go somewhere but didn't know which way to go.

After a while I wanted to see how high he'd jump, so I poked him lightly on top of his body. Nice hop. I poked some more, becoming less gentle as I did. Finally I poked straight down on the toad (not even hard), and his guts came out of his mouth—easy like toothpaste out of a tube.

First I dropped the stick. I thought about the trouble I'd be in if anyone found out what I'd done. So, I dug a hole in the sand and got a piece of bark to scrape up the deflated toad and then his insides. I lifted them to the hole and dropped them in. Then I covered everything over—feeling sick the whole time.

Every night when I went to bed I prayed hard because I figured that squishing the guts out of a toad was something I could go to hell for. About a week later I got a wart on my finger. I couldn't figure out if the wart was punishment God had sent so I wouldn't have to go to hell—or if the wart was a sign that God had seen what I'd done and would take care of me later. I never got the nerve to tell the priest at confession what I'd done.

The power of Cyrene's piece comes partly from the fact that she's telling a secret, something she's not the least bit proud of. Cyrene includes details that give us a vivid (almost TOO vivid!) picture of this incident with the toad. I was struck by the balance of the "outside story" (what she does) and the "inside story" (how she feels). The voice of the narrator is strikingly honest, which gives the writing its power. Even if we don't approve of what she did, we trust that she's telling the truth. Writing with real honesty isn't easy, but it's a crucial element of strong autobiographical writing.

Interview with Jerry Spinelli

Jerry Spinelli has written many award-winning books, such as *Mahiac MacGee*, *Stargirl*, and *Wringer*. He has also written a terrific memoir, *Knots in My Yo-Yo String: The Autobiography of a Kid*. I asked him to share a few insights about how he wrote *Knots in My Yo-Yo String*.

Q: I like your map at the beginning . . . especially the legend. Could you say more about the map—why you included it? Did making that map help you generate ideas to write about?